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JOHN WREN

Gambling is one of Australia's national characteristics. Few other countries have a public holiday because of a horse race and a preserved race horse as a major museum attraction. Australians are among the world's heaviest gamblers.

Gambling has also provided one of Australia's most colourful characters and the basis of one of the country's major novels: John Wren. John Wren was born into a poor Melbourne family of Irish Catholic roots on April 3 1871. He became an extremely rich and influential businessperson from gambling.

Wren opened his first horse gambling business in 1893. Rich people were able to gamble at their clubs and so they evaded punishment by the police. But poor people had to rely on people like Wren to run the tote. He was nabbed by the police three times in his first year.

Ironically, his popularity with punters was due to his honesty: he paid up. His business grew rapidly and he became one of the leaders of the illegal Victorian gambling industry. He did not get involved in protection rackets, prostitution or bootlegging rackets. He became a working class hero, especially for those of Irish Catholic background.

Meanwhile religious figures (mainly Protestants) called on the police to do more stamp out gambling. They complained that people were spending money on gambling which should go on food and clothes. They complained that the police were corrupt. This was also an era of strong religious feuds and the Protestants used Wren's activities as a way of fuelling anti-Catholic feelings. Wren himself was not an active member of the Catholic church, though he did donate to its educational and other services. But John Wren was at the centre of sectarian bitterness, with the Catholic leaders being challenged by Protestant leaders to disown him. Therefore, almost half a century before the publication of one of Australia's most famous novels, John Wren was already a notorious public figure, exciting strong feeling for and against him at the time.

Wren seems to have been able to cope with all this pressure very well. Aged 30, he married Ellen Mahon in 1901. They had a total of nine children. He lived modestly, despite all his wealth. His main interests were sport and gambling. He preferred to be a member of the Collingwood Football Club rather than try to join the elite Melbourne Club.

His influence flowed into the Australian Labor Party and his mobilization of the Irish Catholic voters in Victorian elections. Labor Party members had little money and so the party itself was poor. A person with money, like Wren, could buy influence. But he did not seek to enter Parliament himself,

he did not control the Labor Party and it is unclear just much benefit he derived from all his donations to the party.

Wren's business interests gradually expanded to other areas of entertainment. He had interests in football, cinemas, wrestling and boxing fixtures. He also acquired some newspapers. He was also involved in mining and the oil industry. For almost all of Wren's life, then, he could be seen as a poorly educated working class Irish Catholic boy who did well in an era of elite Protestant snobbery and discrimination. He began with illegal gambling but gradually became a mainline businessperson with extensive and diverse business interests. He was an Australian success story.

But it seemed that his fame (such as it was) would die with him. He would have been known as Australia's leading promoter of public entertainment in the first half of the 20th century. But there was little to interest later generations. Certainly there was nothing to make him a major figure in Australian literature or the subject of an Australian movie.

His life was transformed in 1950, when he was aged 79. He became the subject – as “John West” - of one of the bestselling novels in Australian history: Frank Hardy's Power Without Glory.

Frank Hardy (1917-94) was born into a large Catholic family in Victoria. He left school aged 13 to work in a variety of labouring jobs. He joined the Communist Party in 1939. After leaving the army in 1946 he began work as a Melbourne journalist.

The Communist Party was alarmed at the growing influence of the anti-communist Catholic church in the Labor Party and so decided to write a fictional account of a corrupt Catholic power broker bring discredit on both the church and the Labor party. Members of the Communist Party collected material on John Wren.

Hardy was selected as the author to compile all this material into a book, with his own observations, to produce what he later called a “yarn”. The book was privately published and promoted mainly by word of mouth. It became an underground best seller.

The Wren family decided to retaliate with Mrs Wren bringing a charge of criminal libel. One of Hardy's inventions was Mrs Wren's adultery with a bricklayer. Hardy had little money and so a civil case would achieve little but a criminal libel could result in a prison sentence for Hardy. Interestingly, the prosecution did not charge Hardy with libelling John Wren for his account of “John West's” corrupt business and political activities.

The court case went against Mrs Wren. The case became in effect a trial of Wren himself and the jury had sympathy for the author's allegations of Wren's corruption.

If the Wren family had just ignored the book, it would have remained as an underground best seller and then gradually faded away. But by bringing the court action – in one of Victoria's most famous trials – the book became more well known to a wider range of people. The novel – rather than Wren's own actions – created his fame of being Australia's Al Capone.

There was now an enormous interest in it and a commercial publisher took it on. It is now on school reading lists and the subject of a television movie.

Hardy suddenly became one of Australia's well known writers. But he had a difficult relationship with his comrades in the Communist Party (who resented the way that he took too much credit for the book). His later books failed to create the interest that "Power Without Glory" achieved. He had many gambling problems and he died in January 1994 with a racing form-guide in his hand.

Wren never got over the "Power Without Glory" controversy. He died on October 26 1953. Some political figures found it convenient not to attend his funeral. Protestant religious leaders recalled the old criticisms of Wren and remained unforgiving of all his gambling activities.

In 2000, Wren's grandson CJ Wren launched "Wannabet", a critical study of Australian gambling. One of the book's authors was the Rev Tim Costello (brother of the Treasurer Peter Costello) and a minister at the Collins Street Baptist Church, whose ministers used to preach against Wren's gambling activities. The launch took place just metres away from Wren's first tote.

James Griffin [John Wren: A Life Reconsidered](#), Melbourne: Scribe Publications, 2004

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